



Juan Ortiz-Apuy, Coming to Grips

By Ellyn Walker

YYZ Artists' Outlet



Juan Ortiz-Apuy’s latest exhibition, *Coming to Grips*, at YYZ Artists’ Outlet in Toronto, presents object-oriented ontologies ripe for thinking with, through and alongside histories and realities of touch, grasp, and interrelation. Within the project are three distinct, yet interconnected, works: a 16 mm film loop, a photograph on textile, and installations of *Mimosa Pudica* plants and other objects including a plinth made of rammed earth, wood-fired ceramics, glazed stoneware, hand carved basswood, steel, sugar crystals, horsehair, and plaster. Together, they conjure questions of touch: how to touch, when to touch, if to touch, who touched, who can touch, what touches, and more.

The expansive filmic work within the project presents ethnographic imagery culled from a complete series of National Geographic magazines the artist acquired a few years back on Kijiji. This work, titled, *A History of an Object in 100 Years in 180 Seconds* (2025), has been shown in various formats—as collages, as 35 mm slides, and here, as a 16 mm film loop. Its gesture of image-saving references familial rituals of pinning up Costa Rican content to the fridge found in NG magazines while growing up, which is where the artist and his family originate from. However, here, the installation’s imagery extends beyond the geography of CR to include international photographs, all of which beckon an anthropological gaze. In them, one sees a diversity of insects, animals, corals, bees, and other environmental actors and objects—wherein all of the images are unified by the presence of a visible human hand. The hand(s) are seen touching, holding, pressing, caressing, fingering, gripping, cupping, and measuring. They are always in relation to the objects on display.

The work therefore traces centuries of objects “passing hands,” while reflecting on the magazine’s extensive history of voyeurism and its ethnographic fascination with “exotic” artifacts presented for Western consumption. The film’s sequences arrest viewers with images of world objects that reveal a certain kind of white sight and colonial looking practice that is based on the ethnographic logics of Cabinets of Curiosities and early museum collections that gathered biomorphic objects for encyclopedic display. However, with this work, Ortiz-Apuy is interested equally in how images circulate through mass reproduction as well as how these pictures remain lodged in our collective memory as faint impressions—like afterimages. They appear as new yet also as familiar.

The film’s methodology emerges from the artist’s careful selection and composed inventory that presents images of hands holding or presenting an object to the camera. Rather than organizing the photographs chronologically, they are sequenced by focal length and composition, wherein hands holding an object in a similar manner and at a similar distance from the lens are/were deliberately grouped together. They produce the illusion of movement through a filmic rhythm manifest from similar still images, whereby the “film” unfolds by progressively zooming in on the hands and on smaller objects, all the way down to precise details on fingertips. The interlocking images, histories, and relations create a score of partially visible figures (hands) that are rendered passive while possessing great power and hold/grip. This is because the continuous hands that we see in the film make visible whiteness and power across time and space, wherein the objects are locked in(to) the hold and grip of whiteness inasmuch that they appear and re-appear only in proximity to coloniality. In doing so, enslavement, occupation and settler colonialism come to the fore through the visualization of the white gaze, grip and its control. However, as scholar Christina Sharpe reminds us, a container can also be a kind of vessel.¹ Sociologist Georg Simmel describes “a vessel [is] not intended to be insulated and untouchable but is meant to fulfill a purpose—if only symbolically.”² As Sharpe importantly asks, then, what could a vessel be, do and/or create?³

This question stays with all of the works in *Coming to Grips*, especially with regards to the plant-based and readymade works in the next room that conjure otherwise relations between objects and ecologies. Here, objects become un-burdened by the hold of whiteness that the film draws attention to, inasmuch that many of the readymades appear as black and chrome-coloured ceramic objects. These sculptures have special handles that perform holding(s), reminding us of the ways in which touch and grasp can conjure relations outside of coloniality and whiteness, such as the film draws attention to. White sight is thus interrupted in these object-oriented gatherings and installations, as they display collections that are outside of white figuration, and that beckon a different looking practice as well as touching one.

In contrast to the dilapidated rammed earth plinth that stands in the adjoining gallery, the presentation of objects on the accompanying white plinth appears more like a pristine table setting with a range of containers and vessels—familiar domestic forms reminiscent of teapots, coffee strainers, sugar cubes, and the like. These household shapes bring forward considerations of consumption and desire in relationship to touch, albeit in different ways than the film’s images do, wherein the home is a space in which touch operates foremost through intimacy. However, the arrangement of sculptures gestures towards mediation inasmuch that their proximities are deliberately staged and form part of a collective whole. They call for our touch, yet refuse it simultaneously, just like the precious live/living plants that (in)form much of Ortiz-Apuy’s practice.

Plants appear frequently (with)in the exhibition, too, reflective of Apuy-Ortiz’s ongoing research around ecologies, both near and far. He notably teaches a course at the Monteverde Cloud Rainforest Biological Preserve in Puntarenas Province, Monteverde, Costa Rica, called “Learning from the Cloud Rainforest Field Art School,” and so has developed pedagogies around particular species of plants that carry through his work. For this project, he focuses on the plant *Mimosa Pudica*, a delicate tropical plant native to Central and South America whose leaves fold inward when touched. Ortiz-Apuy grew up with these plants, as they’re very common in the rainforest nearby to his hometown in Tilaran. In Spanish, the plant is called *Dormilonas* (meaning, sleepy ones), referencing the way(s) in which they turn inwards from touch. In this way, the works explore the language of touch and the differentiations between a squeeze, a pinch, a poke, or a grasp, holding space for diverse kinds of affective relationships between the plant and its environments.

The plants also appear as majestic, growing delicate and fuzzy purple flowers at the ends of each arm. To grow without exposure to outdoor light in the middle of an enclosed gallery reflects the magic of plants, which yield new growth in spite of harsh environmental conditions. However, where does consent lie within these ecologies of touch? For the *Mimosa Pudica*, to turn inwards from touch reflects a kind of sovereign act(ion), wherein the plant leads by leaning into its own protocols of inter-relation. However, for the manifold objects presented in the filmic repertoire of NG images, touch represents non-consent vis-à-vis the colonial project, wherein early colonists and white settlers who encountered these cultural objects often stole them and fervently collected them in order to conquer other cultures and appropriate cultural knowledges and artistry as their own. Differently, the plants reflect their own diverse cultural knowledges and environmental relations; they continue to live and unfold and grow albeit on their own terms. What is manifest are living relations that poetically and poignantly contrast the static, historical, and asymmetrical ones

underscored in the film.

Throughout the exhibition, materials are brought into subtle, sturdy and prescient relations, wherein artists who work with the intelligence of materials offer up propositions for what a vessel might be, do or gesture toward. The collection of readymade objects features bulbous white vases from which the *Mimosa Pudica* grow. Inspired by scholar Georg Simmel’s 1911 essay called “The handle: between the vessel and the world,”⁴ Ortiz-Apuy’s elongated vases represent an opening unto/into the world. This is because, “with the handle, the world approaches the vessel; [and] with the spout, the vessel reaches out into the world.”⁵ Moreover, the plant(s) represent shapeshifting, inasmuch that these beautiful forms counter rigidity and instead reflect an expansive elegance, playfulness, enchantment, and site-specific presence and relation. Their shadows and viewpoints move with the viewer’s own bodily positioning and spatial movement in the gallery, creating a rich field of vision that is biomorphic as much as it is also sculptural. How the plant might unfold, or rather, fold into itself, snapping back and then resting once again when the threat of touch has passed, reveals spatial (inter)relations of which we are all implicated.

Indeed, so much of what a vessel might be, describes Sharpe, is to invoke and invite imagining.⁶ In this way, the economy of a grip—to hold onto, to contain, to conquer, to own, to touch, to let go of—are all processes with presence as well as histories. We are reminded of this in the introductory and concluding work of the show, which hangs in the gallery’s main window vitrines—a photograph on silk of the cutest baby donkey. This image comes from the 16 mm film and features a still of a young foal who you immediately want to pet. The suspended silk image subtly ebbs and flows in the window from the gallery’s nearby HVAC system, reminiscent of the way(s) in which a foal might respond to human touch—with curiosity and/or shyness—touch always on their own terms, never neutral. The metal hanging mechanism from which the silk photograph is suspended is meant to mimic a hand cupping gesture, wherein one’s hand beckons trust, care, and attention towards the animal and one’s interaction with it. Here, Simmel argues for “a grip by which the totality of one grasps the totality of the other without either of them being torn to pieces.”⁷

What this vessel holds is thus tenderness that calls for both care and carefulness in its attention towards, including touch. While we are seduced by the animal’s cuteness and want to extend our hand to(wards) it, for what cause? Does our touch bring other registers of understanding to the foal and to the work? Is touch part of our sensing practice and a condition of relationship-building? *Coming to Grips* renders touch in complex, multifarious ways, underscoring the politics of it through visual and material explorations of the grip, the hold, and the vessel. In doing so, Apuy-Ortiz’s works challenge historical and contemporaneous assumptions around relationality, drawing attention to its risks as well as its re-worlding.

ENDNOTES

- Christina Sharpe, “Meetings on Art: What Could a Vessel Be?,” at the 59th International Art Exhibition *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice Biennale Arte 2022.
- Georg Simmel, “The handle: between the vessel and the world,” *Cabinet Magazine*, 2015.
- Sharpe 2022.
- Simmel.
- Ibid.
- Sharpe 2022.
- Ibid.

ELLYN WALKER is an interdisciplinary arts scholar and curator based in Toronto, Treaty 13 territory. Her work explores questions of representation and place-making in the arts as they pertain to distinct positional, cultural, and institutional contexts. Walker has studied at the University of Toronto, McGill, and OCAD University, and completed a PhD in Cultural Studies from Queen’s University where her research focused on decolonial curatorial methodologies used in contemporary exhibition-making and museum practice in Canada and beyond. She is currently working on a co-edited anthology titled *Curatorial Contestations: Critical Exhibition-Making Practices in Canada* that explores diverse curatorial pedagogies and projects from across the country. Walker was recently a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Art department at Colorado College in the US; and has previously taught in the Gender Studies department at Queen’s University and the Visual Studies department at the University of Toronto Mississauga, where she was also the Acting Director/Curator of The Blackwood Gallery from 2021–2022. Her writing has been widely published in books, journals and magazines including McGill-Queen’s University Press, Wilfred Laurier Press, Inuit Art Quarterly, C Magazine, The Journal of Curatorial Studies, Prefix Photo, Blackflash Magazine, The Blackwood, Public Journal, amongst others. She has served as an Advisory Member for the Jackman Humanities Institute and The Alchemy Lecture at York University. She currently teaches Art History and Visual Culture in the Arts, Media and Culture department at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

JUAN ORTIZ_APUY Juan Ortiz-Apuy is a Canadian–Costa Rican artist based in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal since 2003. He holds a BFA from Concordia University, a Postgraduate Diploma from The Glasgow School of Art, and an MFA from NSCAD University. His work has been exhibited internationally at venues including Les Abattoirs Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (France), IKEA Museum (Sweden), DHC/ART Fondation Phi (Montreal), MOMENTA Biennale de l’image (Montreal), Truck Contemporary Art (Calgary), VOX Centre de l’image contemporaine (Montreal), Plug In ICA (Winnipeg), and the Esker Foundation (Calgary).

Ortiz-Apuy has received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, Le Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and in 2024 was awarded Best International Representation by the Costa Rican chapter of AICA. He has participated in residencies at MASS MoCA (USA), The Vermont Studio Center (USA), The Frans Masereel Centre (Belgium), and Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center (Denmark). He is an Associate Professor at Concordia University and leads *Learning From the Cloud Rainforest*, a field art school at the edge of a rain forest in Costa Rica.